



Openness in Adoption: A Fact Sheet for Families

What is open adoption?

Open, or fully disclosed, adoptions allow adoptive parents, and often the adopted child, to interact directly with birth parents. Family members interact in ways that feel most comfortable to them. Communication may include letters, e-mails, telephone calls, or visits. The frequency of contact is negotiated and can range from every few years to several times a month or more. Contact often changes as a child grows and has more questions about his or her adoption or as families' needs change. It is important to note that even in an open adoption, the legal relationship between a birth parent and child is severed. The adoptive parents are the *legal* parents of an adopted child.

The goals of open adoption are:

- To minimize the child's loss of relationships.
- To maintain and celebrate the adopted child's connections with all the important people in his or her life.
- To allow the child to resolve losses with truth, rather than the fantasy adopted children often create when no information or contact with their birth family is available.

Is open adoption right for our family?

Open adoption is just one of several openness options available to families, ranging from confidential, to semi-open (or mediated), to fully open adoption. In semi-open or mediated adoptions, contact between birth and adoptive families is made through a mediator (e.g., an agency caseworker or attorney) rather than directly. In confidential adoptions no contact takes place and no identifying information is exchanged.



Making an open adoption work requires flexibility and a commitment to ongoing relationships, despite their ups and downs. While this type of adoption is not right for every family, open adoption can work well if everyone wants it and if there is good communication, flexibility, commitment to the process, respect for all parties involved, and commitment to the child's needs above all.

There are many resources available to help you determine what level of openness might be best for your family. The chart included with this fact sheet may help you consider some pros and cons of open adoptions. You can also:

EXPLORE THE INTERNET. Several Web sites provide research and issues to consider in open adoption:

- **American Association of Open Adoption Agencies** (www.openadoption.org) helps families find agencies practicing open adoption. Adoptees on their mailing list respond to the question, "What do you wish your adoptive parents had known?"
- **Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project** (<http://fsos.che.umn.edu/mtarp/default.html>) provides information on a longitudinal study of openness in adoption since 1985. The most recent wave included a total of 720 individuals: both parents in 190 adoptive families, at least one adopted child in 171 of the families, and 169 birth mothers. This study was the source of much of the research for this fact sheet and the bulletin for professionals.
- **National Adoption Information Clearinghouse—Cooperative (Open) Adoption Laws**¹ (naic.acf.hhs.gov/laws/coopadopt/index.cfm) provides laws for each State on open (sometimes called "cooperative") adoption, compiled by the Clearinghouse.
- **Insight: Open Adoption Resources and Support** (www.openadoptioninsight.org) offers open adoption resources for professionals and support for adoptive and birth parents considering open adoption.

READ. Several recent books about open adoption may be helpful:

- ***Children of Open Adoption*** by Patricia Martinez Dorner and Kathleen Silber (1997, Independent Adoption Press). The topics in this book include the essential "ingredients" for successful open adoption and communication tips for talking about open adoption with children of all ages.
- ***How to Open an Adoption*** by Patricia Martinez Dorner (1998, R-Squared Press). This book gives guidance to adoptive parents, birth parents, and adoption professionals in how to navigate more inclusive relationships.
- ***Lifegivers: Framing the Birth Parent Experience in Open Adoption*** by James L. Gitter (2000, CWLA Press). This book examines the ways birth parents are marginalized. The author makes the point that adopted children are best served when birth parents and adoptive parents work together to ensure that birth parents remain in children's lives.
- ***The Open Adoption Experience*** by Lois Ruskai Melina and Sharon Kaplan Roszia (1993, HarperPerennial). This complete guide for adoptive and birth parents touches on almost every aspect of open adoption.

Abstracts of these books are available on the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse database: <http://basis1.calib.com/BASIS/chdocs/docs/naicweb/SF>

¹ "Cooperative adoption" or "adoption with contact" refer to arrangements that allow some kind of contact between adoptive families and members of the adopted child's birth family after the adoption has been finalized.

What questions should our family consider in open adoption?

- ***The Spirit of Open Adoption*** by Jim Gritter (1997, CWLA Press). This book gives a realistic look at the joys and pains of open adoption for birth parents, adoptees, and adoptive parents.
- ***What is Open Adoption?*** by Brenda Romanchik (1999, R-Squared Press). Written from the perspective of a birth mother in an open adoption, this pocket guide provides concise information and resources.

TALK WITH A COUNSELOR OR THERAPIST WITH KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE IN OPEN ADOPTION. The National Adoption Information Clearinghouse has a tip sheet on selecting an adoption therapist who is informed about issues of adoption (naic.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/r_tips.cfm). This fact sheet describes the types of mental health professionals available and provides guidelines for choosing the best resource for your family.

TALK WITH OTHER PARENTS. The National Adoption Directory (naic.acf.hhs.gov/database/nadd/naddsearch.cfm) has lists of foster and adoptive parent support groups in each State. Because each parent group will have its own focus, you might want to ask how many families attending the group are in open adoptions.

In open adoptions, families need to consider *when* and *how much* to tell a child about his or her birth family, and then *if* and *how* to involve him or her in that relationship. An adoption professional can help you address some of these issues. Some of the questions you may want to consider include:

- At what age should a child be included in contact with his or her birth family?
- What happens if one party decides to break off all contact?
- What will the birth parents' role be in the child's life?
- How will your child explain his or her relationship with birth relatives to his or her peers?
- How will you handle other adopted siblings who have different levels of openness in their adoptions?

Summary

No one level of openness in adoption is best for everyone, and each adoption changes over time. Adoptees from all kinds of adoptions, from confidential to fully open, can be emotionally healthy. Using the resources listed on this fact sheet, as well as the attached table, you can decide what level of openness is best for your family.



The Clearinghouses
are services of the
Children's Bureau,
Administration for
Children and Families,
U.S. Department of
Health and Human
Services

PROS of Each Type of Adoption for the Involved Parties

	CONFIDENTIAL ADOPTIONS	MEDIATED (SEMI-OPEN)	OPEN ADOPTIONS
	No contact between birth and adoptive families. No identifying information is provided. <i>Only nonidentifying information (e.g., height, hair color, medical history, etc.) is provided through a third party (e.g., agency or attorney).</i>	Nonidentifying contact is made (via cards, letters, pictures) through a third party (e.g., agency or attorney).	Direct interaction between birth and adoptive families. Identities are known.
Birth Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Provides real choice for birth parents when compared to open adoption.✓ Privacy.✓ Some feel this provides a sense of closure and ability to move on with life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Allows for some information transfer between birth and adoptive parents (and perhaps the child).✓ Some privacy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Increased ability to deal with grief and loss.✓ Comfort in knowing child's well-being.✓ Sense of control over decision-making in placement.✓ Potential for more fully defined role in child's life.✓ Potential to develop a healthy relationship with the child as he or she grows.✓ Less pain and guilt about the decision.✓ May make the decision to place for adoption easier (compared to a contested termination of parental rights trial).
Adoptive Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ No need to physically share the child with birth parents.✓ No danger of birth parent interference or co-parenting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Greater sense of control over process.✓ Roles may be more clearly defined than in either confidential or open options.✓ Increased sense of entitlement compared to confidential adoptions.✓ Enhanced ability to answer child's questions about his or her history.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Increased sense of having the "right" to parent and increased ability for confident parenting.✓ Potential for authentic relationship with the birth family.✓ More understanding of children's history.✓ Increased empathy for birth parents.✓ Less fear of birth parents reclaiming child because they know the parent and their wishes.✓ Delight of being "chosen" as a parent.
Adopted Persons	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Protection from unstable or emotionally disturbed birth parents.	Only true when relationship is "shared" with the adopted child <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Genetic and birth history known.✓ Birthparents are "real" not "fantasy."✓ Positive adjustment is promoted in adoptee.	
			<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Direct access to birth parents and history.✓ Need to search is eliminated.✓ Identity questions are answered (Who do I look like? Why was I placed?).✓ Eases feelings of abandonment.✓ Lessening of fantasies: birth parents are "real."✓ Increased circle of supportive adults.✓ Increased attachment to adoptive family (especially if the birth parents support the placement).✓ Preservation of connections (e.g., with siblings, relatives).✓ Lessens loyalty conflicts (according to recent research).✓ Exposure to racial and ethnic heritage.✓ Ability for evolving, dynamic, and developmentally appropriate account of the adoption.

CONS of Each Type of Adoption for the Involved Parties

	CONFIDENTIAL ADOPTIONS	MEDIATED (SEMI-OPEN)	OPEN ADOPTIONS
	<p>No contact between birth and adoptive families. No identifying information is provided.</p> <p><i>Only nonidentifying information (e.g., height, hair color, medical history, etc.) is provided through a third party (e.g., agency or attorney).</i></p>	<p>Nonidentifying contact is made (via cards, letters, pictures) through a third party (e.g., agency or attorney).</p>	<p>Direct interaction between birth and adoptive families. Identities are known.</p>
Birth Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Less grief resolution due to lack of information about the child's well-being. ✓ May encourage denial of fact that child was born and placed with another family. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Loss of potential for direct relationship with adoptive family (and/or child). ✓ Increased grief in the initial years, less later. ✓ Loss of contact if intermediary changes or leaves (i.e., staff turnover, policy changes, or agency closings). ✓ Birth mother may feel obligated to place child due to the emotional or financial support given by the prospective adoptive parents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Full responsibility for setting relationship limits and boundaries. ✓ Potential abuse of trust (fewer safeguards). ✓ Potential disappointment if adoptive family cannot meet all expectations or needs. ✓ Birth mother may feel obligated to place child due to the emotional or financial support given by the prospective adoptive parents.
Adoptive Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Allows for denial of "adopted family" or fertility status. ✓ Increased fear, less empathy for birth parents. ✓ No access to additional medical information about birth family. ✓ Less control: agency controls information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Loss of the full relationship with the birth parents. ✓ Lack of ability to have questions answered immediately. ✓ Potentially troubling cards, letters, or pictures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Full responsibility for setting relationship limits and boundaries. ✓ Potential pressure: accept openness or no child. ✓ Potential difficulty with emotionally disturbed birth parents. ✓ Potential for supporting both child and birth parents (emotionally).
Adopted Persons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Possible adolescent identity confusion (unable to compare physical and emotional traits to their birth families). ✓ Limited access to information that others take for granted. ✓ Potential preoccupation with adoption issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Similar to confidential adoptions, if information not shared with the adoptee. ✓ Potential perception that it is unsafe to interact with birth family directly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ No clean break for assimilation into family, which some feel is necessary. ✓ Potential feelings of rejection if contact stops. ✓ Difficulty explaining the relationship to peers. ✓ Potential for playing families against each other.